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Best Records

A subjective guide to top pop music of last 25 years

By JUAN RODRIGUEZ
of The Gazette

As the 1970s come to a close, we are reminded that there's been a quarter of a century of rock 'n' roll music. To illustrate how the music has evolved, the following list of major recordings, a basic rock library, has been compiled:

Early rock 'n' roll:

Elvis — The Sun Sessions (RCA): Early rockabilly recorded in Nashville on the eve of Elvis Presley's international success. *Elvis' Worldwide 50 Gold Award Hits, Vol 1* (RCA) is the most complete chronicle of his initial impact on the rock 'n' roll hit parade, carrying through the end of the 1950s. After Elvis went to Hollywood the music got watered down, but he made a substantial comeback in 1969 with *From Memphis to Vegas / Vegas to Memphis* (RCA).

The main architect of rock was not Elvis the Pelvis but Chuck Berry who is best represented on *Golden Decade* (Chess), a brilliant demonstration of Berry's jive-talking rock 'n' roll vocabulary that's influenced most everything to follow. Also the greatest hits packages by Bo Diddley and Fats Domino represent their groundbreaking service to the cause of rock 'n' roll.

A brilliant young career was snuffed out in a 1959 air crash but Buddy Holly: *20 Golden Hits* (MCA) preserves the memory. His recordings epitomize the creative spark of his rockabilly style.

Two anthologies, among many, sum up the early hits: *The Atlantic Years Volume 1* (Atlantic), starring the likes of the Coasters, the Drifters et al; and the 6-disc *Cruisin'* (GRT) series, recreations of disc jockey patter and vintage advertising spots with original hits prior to the Beatles years.

The early 1960s:

Phil Spector's *Greatest Hits* (Warner Bros): The creator of the 'wall-of-sound', Spector was the first and perhaps the most imaginative producer to mine the capabilities of the recording studio. Hits by the Ronettes, Crystals, Righteous Brothers, Ike & Tina Turner reflect Spector's contribution to 1960s pop.

Motown, the soul music factory from Detroit, created a synthesis of funky streetcorner harmony-rhythms and sophisticated arrangements. The company's best work is presented on the Greatest Hits collections by the likes of Smokey Robinson & The Miracles, The Temptations, The Four Tops and The Supremes.

Ray Charles' *25th Anniversary* (ABC) presents the high points of the singer most able, until the advent of Stevie Wonder, to combine soul and pop.

The British invasion and mid-1960s:

The anthology *Beatles 1962-1966* (Capitol) remains the best indicator the group's fresh approach to rock 'n' roll that changed the spirit of the music to follow. Other excellent examples of the group's ingenuity are the longer British pressings of *Beatles For Sale*, *Help!* and *Revolver* (all EMI). The most acclaimed Beatles' album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (Capitol) was also its most pretentious, although it "elevated" rock to a pop art form, the disc was basically trite and has led to a lot of superfluous technically dazzling discs by others.

The Rolling Stones answered the call of the wild, adapting rhythm 'n' blues to a hard demonic form of rock. *Hot Rocks 1964-1971* (London) is the best example of the group's early era, started by *12 x 5* (London) — recorded in the Chicago's famed Chess studios with Muddy Waters looking on — and culminating with the raw jagged *Beggar's Banquet* (London) of 1968.

Other British groups proliferated, but the imitators fell away. Those whose records remain vital today are the Kinks' *Greatest Hits* (Pye, British) and The Animals *On Tour* (MGM). The Who typified the energy of British Mods and Rockers in such works as *My Generation* (MCA) and the compilation *Meaty, Beaty, Big and Bouncy*, as well as going for the big bucks with the murk-overrated rock-opera *Tommy* (MCA). Traffic produced its share of good music, especially *John Barleycorn Must Die* (Island).

Bob Dylan influenced rock lyricism forever beginning with a chart-topping single *Like a Rolling Stone* and two albums, *Bringing It All Back Home* and *Highway 61 Revisited* (Columbia), which mixed satiric lyrics, personal imagery and stinging rock. *Blonde on Blonde* (Columbia) is a smokey haunting double-disc opus.

Dylan's sound initiated a "folk-rock" boomlet. *The Best of the Lovin' Spoonful* (MGM) is the best example of the tender folksy aspect of the fusion of folk and r'n'r. The Byrds' *Mr. Tambourine Man* (Columbia) is another excellent record that influenced many. The Beach Boys emerged from their surf sound to provide the most lavishly orchestrated albums of this eclectic era in *Pet Sounds* (Capitol).

Funky soul

Soul music gained a foothold among the mass audience during the melting pot of the mid-1960s, best popularized by Otis Redding's *Dock of the Bay* (Stax-Volt). James Brown's gritty dance sound on *Sex Machine* (King), and Aretha Franklin's inspiring singing (*Greatest Hits*, Atlantic). The rhythm 'n' blues musicians who backed some of these soul stars also had hits. The definition of musical funk can be heard from Booker T. & the MGs' *Best Of...* (Atlantic/Stax); the group also did an enduring movie soundtrack, *Uptight* (Stax). Down in New Orleans, producer Allen Toussaint was creating a funky-gumbo sound. He's best heard solo on *Southern Nights* (Reprise), which features his perennial workmates The Meters, responsible for the Southern syncopation of such albums as *Rejuvenation* (Reprise).

Style of decade

Like it or not, the American west coast psychedelic music was probably the influential style of the decade. It was the music of excess — outrageous vocals, long guitar and keyboard solos, and blasting volume — and it provided the record industry with a platform from which to balloon into the $10 billion operation it is today.

Jefferson Airplane's *Surrealistic Pillow* (RCA) and the first album by the Doors (*Elektra*) are the best examples of the blowing your mind concept. The premier shooter of the era, Janis Joplin, died in 1970 while finishing her third album *Pearl* (Columbia), which showed her bellicose sexual style straining.

The most original instrumentalist of the psychedelic era was Jimi Hendrix. His *Electric Ladyland* (British import) and *Smash Hits* (Reprise) exude the kind of electric guitar paroxysms that haven't been equalled since his death in 1970. Carlos Santana, a cleaner, more elegant guitarist, came out of the San Francisco explosion and his band Santana as the orchestrators of Afro-Cuban and rock musics with such records as *Europe* (Columbia). The Grateful Dead has also survived the era but, curiously, its most memorable album, *Workingman's Dead* (Warners), is a lean, acoustically-oriented set, which is out of character.

Frank Zappa emerged from the West Coast "freak out" scene to become the iconoclast of rock, as well as its most complex composer. *Absolutely Free* (MGM) was the forerunner of numerous fine 1970s albums, including *Apostrophe* (Discreet) and *Live At The Roxy and Elsewhere* (Discreet).

The excess explosion led to a number of bands who turned up the amps and thundered a "heavy-metal" sound. The original, Led Zeppelin (Atlantic), was probably the most powerful, through to its fourth album, although there have been a number of high energy bands to make millions in the 1970s: Aerosmith, Boston, Kansas, Bad Company, Ted Nugent, et al. Psychedelia spread to England, through such groups as Yes, King Crimson and Pink Floyd, whose *Dark Side of the Moon* (Capitol) is the most popular example of the cosmic-rock genre.

One group of American rock 'n' rollers, The Band, was determined to prove that you didn't have to give up roots to rock with passion. The Band's passion is Americana, best reflected on *Music From Big Pink* (Capitol) and *The Band* (Capitol), as well as their fabled home-taping collaboration on traditional R&B, folk and country with Dylan, *The Basement Tapes* (Columbia).

Blues-rock was best epitomized by Derek (Eric Clapton) & the Dominoes' *Layla* (Atco), which features perhaps the most gripping rock guitar performances, by Clapton and Duane Allman, on record.

Down on the farm

Country-rock was another sub genre to grow up at the beginning of the 1970s, popularized by such discs as *Sweetheart of the Rodeo* (Columbia), by The Byrds, and *Nashville Skyline* (Columbia), by Dylan. Kris Kristofferson, with *Me and Bobby McGhee* (Monument) was the first of the "New Nashville" singer-songwriters to break through on the mass market.

The 1970s has disappointed many in that a "new Beatles" revolution did not evolve. However, the decade shows a refinement in recording and merchandising techniques — resulting in scores of successes by heavy-rock bands, a few individual milestones and the overall establishment of the record industry as an entertainment juggernaut.

Singer-songwriters, in the mode of James Taylor, abounded. Van Morrison was the most original: his *Astral Weeks* (Warner Brothers) is an evocative blend of blues and modern jazz; *Moondance* (Warners) was a collection of magical songs in a mellow rhythm 'n' blues style. Randy Newman provided a quirkier look at life, *Little Criminals* (Warners) and *Good Old Boys* (Warners), about the old and new south. Jackson Browne epitomized a cool West Coast lifestyle in *Late for the Sky*. Neil Young ruminated upon the fall from innocence on *After the Goldrush* (Reprise), a theme developed throughout his career on the three-disc retrospective *Decade* (Reprise). Joni Mitchell presented the most original vocal style throughout the 1970s, maturing on such works as *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* (Warners) and *Mingus* (Warners), her recent tribute to jazzman Charles Mingus. Dylan contributed another outstanding album in *Blood on the Tracks*, more searingly personal than ever.

Wonder of Wonders

Towering above them in recording and musical innovations was Stevie Wonder, whose highly evolved fusion of soul, pop and jazz styles can be heard on such albums as *Innervisions*, *Fulfillingness' First Finale* and the two-disc opus, *Songs in the Key of Life* (all on Motown). Many have compared Wonder to a modern-day Duke Ellington, and after 1979's *Journey Through the Secret Life of Plants* Wonder was being hailed as the most creative popular musician of the 1970s. Another fine "concept" album in a similar vein was Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On*.

In England there was another innovator. David Bowie whose theatrical style is best expressed on *Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (RCA) and *Station to Station* (RCA). Rod Stewart put out remarkably compassionate rock 'n' roll on *Atlantic Crossing* (Warners) and *A Night on the Town* (Warners), in addition to earlier recordings on *Sing It Again Rod* (Mercury).

The New York school of rock grew of age, led by former Velvet Underground Lou Reed, whose erratic punk posturings have nevertheless resulted in a remarkable body of good work, including *Transformer*, the live *Rock 'n' Roll Animal* and recently *The Bells*. Bruce Springsteen beat down his hype and proved to be the most energetic and giving of the New Yorkers at the end of the 1970s — with *Born To Run* (Columbia) — while **Billy Joel** brought the New York state of mind to America with *52nd Street* (Columbia).

While voluminous hard-rock bands were selling millions, some American outfits used more sophistication to reach a wider audience. The laid-back drugstore-cowboy image was carved out by the Eagles, in *Greatest Hits, 1971-75* (Asylum) and *Hotel California* (Asylum), and recently in *The Long Run* (Asylum). Fleetwood Mac had been kicking around for years before finding a slick enjoyable formula in *Fleetwood Mac* (Warners) and *Rumours* (Warners). A survivor from the San Francisco era, Steve Miller, produced the lyrical honeycombed *Fly Like an Eagle* (Capitol). And Steely Dan prepared an incomparable blend of pop and jazz in *Greatest Hits, 1972-77* (ABC) and *Aja* (ABC).

New wave makes splash

The high degree of sophistication of these records perhaps resulted in a backlash that is at the root of the "new wave" movement. As yet, only Elvis Costello, Graham Parker, Talking Heads and, most eclectically, The Police — with *Outlandos d'Amour* (A&M) — have been the most commercially acceptable of the new-wavers, with The Clash — *Give 'Em Enough Rope* (Columbia) — and The Boomtown Rats — *Tonic For The Troops* (Mercury) — the most original of those waiting in the wings.

Some record listeners have ditched mainstream rock for Jamaican reggae, as recorded by Bob Marley — *Kaya* (Island) — and the soundtrack of *The Harder They Come* (Island).

The most prominent alternative music is, of course, disco. It's a kind of music that exists solely to make people dance and seems to be succeeding overwhelmingly as the decade draws to a close. Although much of it is samey, some artists (and their svengali-like producers) stand out artistically, such as the soundtrack to the film *Saturday Night Fever* (RSO) by the Bee Gees, who followed with *Spirits Having Flown* (RSO), one of the most sublime productions of the decade.

Top row: Bob Dylan, Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry. Middle: John Lennon, George Harrison, Paul McCartney, Ringo Starr. Bottom: Mick Jagger, Frank Zappa, Ray Charles.

Top hits of 1979

Despite the merchants of hype, there was a lot of good music around in 1979. Here are my picks as the 10 best albums (the honorable mentions are just as fine):

Bee Gees, *Spirits Having Flown* (RSO): Smoothest harmony and band arrangements of the year: the perfect fusion of disco, soul and pop.

Roy Clark and Gatemouth Brown, *Makin' Music* (ABC): Country and western, rhythm and blues, jazz — you name it, this eclectic brew is the hottest session of the year.

Ry Cooder, *Bop 'til You Drop* (Warner Brothers): The guitarist as archivist reworks obscure rhythm 'n' blues songs to create purely American music for all seasons.

Bob Dylan, *Slow Train Coming* (Columbia): Rock's premier poet as sanctified gospel singer is an inspiration.

Eagles, *The Long Run* (Asylum): After two long years, California mucho here we come. Narcissism as streety as the guitar work.

Fleetwood Mac, *Tusk* (Warner Brothers): They overindulged, but this supergroup came up with one of rock's great works of romance.

Manhattan, *Soundtrack by Zubin Mehta and New York Philharmonic Orchestra, Rudy Grafman pianist* (Columbia Masterworks): Gershwin was quintessential pop art of the 1930s, this divine soundtrack provides a comeback.

Joni Mitchell, *Mingus* (Reprise): The great rock-folk singer meets jazz in this collaboration with the late Charles Mingus. Reverent, adventurous music.

Talking Heads, *Fear of Music* (Sire): Archly original futuristic sound that outstrips the avant-garde.

Stevie Wonder, *Journey Through the Secret Life of Plants* (Motown): A great splash of music, fusing the modern with the timeless in sumptuous fashion.

Other honorables: Ron Wood, *Gimme Some Neck* (Columbia); Dire Straits, *Communique* (Mercury); Weather Report, *8:30* (Columbia); Leonard Cohen, *Recent Songs* (Columbia); Gino Soccio, *Outline* (RFC); Carly Simon, *Spy* (Elektra); Lou Reed, *The Bells* (Arista); Donna Summer, *Bad Girls* (Casablanca); Bombers 3 (Telson); B.B. King, *Take It Home* (ABC); Randy Newman, *Born Again* (Warner Bros.); The Kinks, *Low Budget* (Arista); Frank Zappa, *Joe's Garage, Act I and Acts II and III* (Zappa-Phonogram); Pat Metheny, *New Chautauqua* (ECM); and *American Garage* (ECM); Iggy Pop, *New Values* (Arista); J.J. Cale, *5* (Shelter); Tom Petty & the Heartbreakers, *Damn the Torpedoes* (MCA); Joan Armatrading, *Steppin' Out* (A&M); *Apocalypse Now*, Soundtrack (Warner Brothers); Boomtown Rats, *Fine Art of Surfacing* (Mercury).

— Juan Rodriguez.

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